Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee:	Robert Brown
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Interviewer:	David Cline
Videographer:	John Bishop
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Robert Brown: As ready as I'm going to be. [Laughs]

David Cline: [Laughs] Alright, alright.

John Bishop: We're rolling.

David Cline: Okay, fantastic. So, I'm just going to record a little opening message just for the recording, and then we'll start talking.

Robert Brown: Okay.

David Cline: This is David Cline from Virginia Tech and the Southern Oral History Program, recording today for the Civil Rights History Project of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress. Today is the first of October, 2013, and we have the pleasure of being in High Point, North Carolina, today, with Mr. Robert Brown. Behind the camera is John Bishop of Media Generation and UCLA, and

we also have Elaine Nichols from the museum here today, too. So, I just want to start by saying thank you so much for making time in your schedule for us today.

Robert Brown: Well, thank you for being here.

David Cline: Yeah, absolutely. And what I'd like to do, I know we have a lot of ground to cover. [Pause] Fantastic. So, if we could just start with your childhood, or even before your childhood, if you like, talking about your family and your roots here, I think, in this area, I think that would be a great place to start.

Robert Brown: Okay. I was born and raised here in High Point where I live now. And my grandmother, who raised me, was born and raised in Anson County. That's down in eastern North Carolina. And her father, his name was Joseph Kendall, Sr., was a slave in that county down there. And he was one of those who was used to help build the railroads in North Carolina, because a lot of the labor building the railroads during that period was slave labor.

And interestingly enough, I became—a number of years ago, twenty-some years ago—the governor appointed me, Governor Jim Martin appointed me to be the president and CEO of the North Carolina Railroad Company, which the state owned the majority shares in, now, and the state owns all the shares in now. And it was like coming full circle.

DC: I was going to say, was that four generations, three?

RB: It was full circle.

DC: Yeah.

DC: And so, that's one of the other interesting things or interesting parts of my life that I've had to happen. But early on, my grandmother used to talk about the railroad, because she was a maid up at the Southern Railroad station here in High Point. And wherever we went,

usually if the train went there, we would ride the train, because she could get a discount on the tickets. And so, my brother and I would go with her all over the place.

And so, one day, she came to us and said, you know, "We're going to catch the bus." We're going down to her home area, called Wadesboro. "But we're going to go by Fayetteville, North Carolina, because there's something that I want you all to see." And we were just small boys. I mean, I was probably eight or nine years old. My brother was eleven or twelve. And she said, "There's something I want you all to see."

And so, we got on the bus and we went to Fayetteville, North Carolina. We were going to change buses there, but there was a layover. And my grandmother said, "Come on! We're going to walk on down here." So, she asked, got off the bus, and we asked somebody, "Where is the old slave mart in Fayetteville?" And the fellow says, "Oh, you go down this street. It's just right down the road there."

So, we walked around there. And she said, "I just wanted to bring you all here, because this was the last place that my father was sold here in North Carolina," was at that slave mart in Fayetteville. And so, it's the kind of thing you never really forget.

And my grandmother was a sainted woman who believed in God and believed in helping everybody and wanted to do something. And she wanted her people to do something. She wanted me and my brother and her son, my uncle, and my mother, her daughter, to really do some meaningful things.

DC: Um-hmm. What did that do for you or to you, seeing that place in Fayetteville?

RB: It didn't do [0:05:00] as much for me then as it did for me later. And here I am, all these years later, I'm seventy-some years old, and I was like eight or nine then. I was old enough to understand what it was and so forth, and my brother was, too. And the more I grew up and the

more I studied—and I became steeped in history. History was my major subject; it was my major in college, and U.S. history, in particular. And I wanted to know more. I mean, it gave me an insatiable appetite to really get some base knowledge about the history of America and the history of slavery and the Reconstruction and all that. So, it piqued my interest as a young boy, and I never forgot it. Here I am, all these years later, generations later, decades later, still talking about that trip. And it was incredible!

And then, we would go down to Wadesboro, and we would go down there maybe two or three times a year to see her sisters. They still lived on those farms and so forth. And we would go by, on several occasions, we would go by to see the old house where my grandmother grew up. It was an old clapboard place with no paint, and a big old fireplace in there, and it was rundown and so forth. And my grandmother would say, you know, "We grew up here and we raised cotton and farmed out here on the land." And I would look at this place, and it was—it was incredible.

And then, she'd say—there was an old, what they called Rosenwald School. And there was this old school building out there. And the school building—I was down there a month and a half ago, in that area, and I went by there. And that school building is still there, and they're trying to renovate it a little bit now. It's still standing, all these years later. So, it really piqued my interest in history and what was going on and all of that, you know.

DC: Um-hmm. What's your grandmother's name?

RB: Nellie, N-E-L-L-I-E. Nellie Marshall Brown. Her maiden name was Kendall, Nellie Kendall.

JB: Excuse me a second. Would it—?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

DC: Alright, great. Thank you, appreciate it. Alright, so maybe we could talk a little bit about just growing up, then, here in High Point, and what that was like, and your schooling.

RB: Yeah. Growing up was—it was—it was—it was tough.

DC: You were born in what year, now?

RB: I was born in 1935, February of 1935. And, you know, it was—we were poor, difficult circumstances. Everything was segregated. There were certain water fountains you couldn't drink out of, toilets you couldn't go to. You know, if you went places, if they had a toilet, if they *had* a toilet for blacks—most of them did not have a toilet for blacks. See, they had toilets, but you couldn't use them, because they had "white toilet" for men, "white toilet" for women. They had big signs up there, "White," so you knew right away.

But, you know, a funny thing. We used to go—one of my favorite places to shop as a young boy, a young kid, was the Woolworth's store, because they would have a variety of everything. Unlike Kress, S.H. Kress, or Kresge, or some of the others, Woolworth's would always seem to have good quality stuff, and they would have a variety of stuff. So, I liked to go into the Woolworth's store, and my grandmother would take me in the Woolworth's store.

So, in the back of the Woolworth's store, there were the water fountains. You had "White Water" and you had "Colored Water." Right over the fountain, you had "White Water" and you had "Colored Water." So, I mean, I'm just a little boy. I don't know that much about [0:10:00] the white water and colored water. And I would be, you know—so, one day, I'm drinking out of the white water, because I just thought maybe the water had a little white in it, or something.

And so, my grandmother saw me. She was over there, looking at something, and I'm there, drinking water out of the white water. And she turned around and saw me drinking out of that white water, and she came over there and she pulled me away from it. She said, "Boy, don't

drink out of that white water fountain!" I said, "Mama, it ain't nothing but water. It tastes like the same water as the water over there at the colored!" I said, "I just wanted to see what the white water was like."

And she said, "It's the same water, son. It's just that people want you to drink out of the one, the colored water." And she said, "One of these days, it'll be changed, but right now we have to drink out of the white water and the colored water." So, I said, "Well, Mama, ain't it the same water?" And she said, "Oh, yeah. It's all God's water." And she said, "God's going to change it. He's going to fix it after a while." She said, "I may not live to see it, but He's going to fix it." But thank God she lived to see that it was fixed!

And thank God that she lived to see that I helped to fix it! And, amazingly, I helped to fix it on many sides. Because when I went into business in 1961, in early '61, my first major client was the F.W. Woolworth Company, my first major client. And in 1961, there was still colored and white water in the South. In 1961, there were still colored and white toilets—in 1961, in 1962, and 1963. And Woolworth became one of my major clients.

And I think they became a major client because I went to them and told them that they needed to change and that there was a change coming and they needed to get with it and have their thing, stay in front of it, so that they could remain a viable entity in America and, indeed, in the world, if they wanted to do that. And they were—I found them interested in doing that, and it amazed me.

But in a year and a half after I went to them, and they hired me to do assessments around the country and to tell them what they ought to be doing, in terms of their change and integrating and so forth across the country, I was the principle advisor on all of this kind of thing to their company. It was one of the major companies in America, and the people on their board of

directors, from the chairman on down, were some of the major financiers in America. John J. McCloy, who was the high commissioner in Germany after World War II to reconstruct Germany, he was one of the people on their board and executive committee. Fred Kirby, who was chairman of the Allegheny Corporation, which was the predecessor of all these major hedge funds and all of that. They owned the New York Central railroad and a whole lot of other companies. They were the biggest people, financiers, in America, at that time. And they were the ones who were responsible for setting policy and everything else at Woolworth's.

DC: Um-hmm.

RB: And so, when I got to know them, and they got to know what I was doing, they would invite me to their board retreats and to golf outings and so forth at the Westchester Country Club. And I would be making presentations to their board of directors on the kinds of things they ought to be doing and what was happening in America and where we were going and that we needed to be in front of it, not behind it. And they really believed what I told them. I was fascinated [0:15:00] just by that.

Then, they began to tell me that there were companies around in America who needed this kind of advice and counsel, other companies, many of them that they controlled or that they were big shareholders in. And so, they would send me to see other CEOs and the chairman of the board of this company or that company, and I got a lot of business, a lot of clients, just by following their advice and counsel on who I should go see. And every time I'd go tell them that Mr. Kirby sent me, or Mr. McCloy, who was one of the biggest lawyers in America, sent me, or he told me to call you all, *boom*, I had another client immediately.

DC: Maybe we could back up for just a second, and we'll back up a little bit further, too, but if you could tell us just a little bit about the company that you started, and when you started it, and why.

RB: I started it—I started out as a policeman here in High Point.

DC: Well, maybe let's just back up a little bit further, and then we'll catch up with that, then.

RB: Okay.

DC: So, we were talking about your childhood, but maybe a little bit more about the school that you went to here. I know that was very important for you.

RB: Oh, yeah.

DC: And then your—

RB: It was—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

DC: – the file.

RB: Oh, okay.

DC: So, we'll take little breaks.

RB: Okay.

JB: We're back.

DC: We're back. So, yeah.

RB: Well, starting out, I started out—there was a little grade school not too far away from my house called Leonard Street School. I went to the sixth grade there. And in the seventh grade, all the classes for the black schools went to William Penn High School. And so, I went to William Penn High School, which was a school that was founded by the Quakers who dominated

the area, this area in North Carolina. And so, I went there in the seventh grade, and from then on, I—and I graduated from there in the twelfth.

But it was an extraordinary experience there, because one of my first major experiences at William Penn was the principal came to me one day, and he said, "You know, you're a bright young fellow, and there's something that I have for you to do." And I asked him, "Yes, sir, what is it?" He said, "We have Mary McLeod Bethune coming to the school in the next few days. And I want you to be on your best behavior, because I want you to meet her at the door and stay with her and guide her around the school, all around the school, and stay with her until she gets ready to leave in the afternoon."

And that's what I did. I met her at the door. A car came up with her, and I met her at the door, told her who I was and that I was going to be her escort. And I escorted her around, and she counseled me all that time. For several hours, she would tell me—she asked me about my family, about what I wanted to do with my life, and then she said, "You know, you're a bright young man. You're going to do some wonderful things with your life." But she said, "You've got to work hard." She said, "You can't just come in here every day and run and play and everything. You've just got to work at it." And all the way through, all day long, she would counsel me and tell me about her life. And it was an *extraordinary* experience.

DC: Hmm.

RB: And that was one of my first real experiences in school at William Penn.

DC: Um-hmm.

RB: And then, later on, we had people like Langston Hughes to come to the school, people like Dr. Dellie Boger, who was a professor at Morehouse College, who had graduated from William Penn. We had Colonel Smith, who became a colonel in the Army, who had

graduated from William Penn, to come back and speak, and so forth. And so, we had a lot of—we interfaced with a great number of people who had graduated from William Penn and who had done extremely well—to come back. They would always come back and speak to the kids and do different things with us and that sort of thing. So, it was a great experience. And I think that sowed the seeds for me wanting to do things.

I was a [0:20:00] voracious reader. I stayed in the library. The kids used to pick at me a lot of times. They'd say, "Oh, man, you're going back to the library again?" I played football and stuff like that, just like other kids, but I was always reading something. I was always reading all the magazines and newspapers, because I wanted to know what was happening in the country and in the world.

DC: Yeah, yeah.

RB: And so, when I would go to the civics class, or something like that, I would know a lot of things. By the time I was in the tenth or eleventh grade, I knew a lot. I mean, I was up to date on all the current affairs of what was happening in the world. So, I became, near the end of the tenth grade, I became the editor of our school paper. And I think somewhere along the line, I have some of those papers now, and I go back and I read some of the editorials that I wrote as an eleventh grade and twelfth grade student. And sometimes, I don't believe that [laughs] I wrote that, you know, in the eleventh or twelfth grade. But it was extraordinary, and I enjoyed it immensely.

DC: Do you remember some of the things that you read back then? I think it's so interesting to think of being in a relatively small place like High Point, North Carolina, but you were really connecting out to a much larger world, and through some of these people that came to town, too.

RB: Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah. I read—I was reading all the time. First of all, I would read all the magazines, all the big magazines that would come into the school, in the school library. We didn't have money to get a lot, so whatever came in, the magazines and newspapers. And then, from time to time, we would have the Sunday *New York Times* in there, from time to time. And then, we would have many of the local papers in there. And I would go in there, because we didn't have money to get those papers and magazines, so I'd go in there and I'd read everything in there. And then, I'd read different books about, you know, what was happening in the world and different things. So, it was—

But even more than that, there was a lady who lived across the street from us. Her name was Mrs. [ ], and she worked for a wealthy white family. And one day, I was sitting on the steps and I had some old newspapers. I had maybe five or six newspapers there that I was going through. And I had gotten them from somewhere, probably got them out of a garbage can, because we didn't have money to get books or newspapers or magazines. So, I'd get them, I'd scrounge them up, and I'd bring them home, and I'd sit there on the porch on the steps and read them.

So, one day, I'm reading these newspapers and so forth, and Mrs. [20:34] comes home from work. And she sees me out there, reading these newspapers, and she stops. And she said, "Bobby," she said, "I see you're reading a lot. You love to read, don't you?" I said, "Yes, ma'am." She said, "Well, I throw away newspapers and magazines every month up there where I work, and sometimes, two or three times a month." She said, "They don't keep them." She said, "If you'd like them, I'll bring them all home to you." I said, "Oh, yes, ma'am!" It was like the Lord Himself was speaking to me!

So, for the next few *years*, she would, about two or three times a month, she would bring a big box of newspapers and magazines home. And, I mean, it would be sometimes the *New York Times* in there, and magazines from New York and different places, different kinds of magazines. And I would go through and I would read every one of them, *every one of them.* And so, I became—I mean, I could go through a box of stuff, magazines and newspapers.

And I find myself, all these years later, I still read every day. I read several newspapers. I probably, in the course of any day, at the end of the day, I probably have read eight, ten, sometimes twelve or fifteen newspapers from different parts of the country. I subscribe to newspapers [0:25:00] from different parts of the country, so that I will know what's happening in different places and I will have some idea, so that when I speak to different groups, or I'm giving some thoughts, my thoughts on what's happening in different areas, to my clients, then, you know, I'm giving it from a factual point of view. I'm not just pulling something out of the wind. And usually, when I'm in a meeting, whether it's a board meeting of a major corporation that I might be on the board, or I might be giving a presentation, and they ask me questions, nine times out of ten, I'm going to know what I'm talking about. It's not going to be some theory or something that I just looked up in the air and pulled down. You know, I'm going to know what is going on.

And that's the way I've been since I was in high school. And I was that way—I've been that way in business. I've been that way in different things, jobs that I've held. When I was at the White House, when I would go in a meeting, I had done not only reading, but I had different people who always sent me different kinds of information on different communities and places in the world, information. And I still have those contacts in Africa and Europe and different places around the world, so when I'm in a board meeting—I've served on the board of directors of

some of the largest companies in the world and still serve on a few. And when something comes up about one thing or another, I usually know something about it. I may not know the in-depth phase of what happened, but I usually know something about it. And I can tell you sometimes why it happened here, because it happened over there and it, you know, made a trail over here and is happening there because somebody wanted that deal over here to happen. So, you know, you can put the dots together. But the only way you can do that is to have the knowledge base to do that. You can't do that on air, you know. And I found that out a long time ago, you know, back in high school and college.

DC: It's interesting that you say that, because I was struck by that, just reading about you and your career, that you end up operating, you know, in these national, obviously, and international circles, but so rooted in the local, and coming back home to High Point and staying in High Point. So, it's interesting for me to hear you say how important it is for you to understand what's happening at a very local level in the places where you work.

RB: Yeah, because when I go into a boardroom or when I go to make a presentation to a major group in New York or London or Paris or Rome or Legos, Nigeria, you know, I know what I'm talking about, you know. And not only have I read, but I've done a lot of background work. And so, and after a while, and having done it for *decades*, I can watch the trends. And the trends most of the time do not lie, but you've got to be able to understand what happened twenty-five or thirty years ago, and how that's coming back into the [groove/brew] at this point and have some idea of what's going to happen as a direct result of that.

I was telling somebody the other day that many things are happening to American companies now, having to do with race-related kinds of problems, because a lot of the management in American companies and in other companies have no frame of reference to these

kinds of problems and what existed. Because the people who were there earlier, who went through this phase, who went through all the problems, they went through it, so they have an idea. But most of those people are either dead and gone, or they have retired, and they are no longer on the scene. The people who are there, running many of the companies and many aspects of the companies and many divisions of the companies, they have no idea. They have no idea of what happened way back, or maybe they read a memo, but they have no idea about what's happening. And that's why you have [0:30:00] today, and you are going to have even more so, I would say over the next two or three years, a lot of race-related kinds of problems in major companies, because they are not prepared to deal with them.

They think because they have somebody who is head of diversity or something like that in the company, which is fine, that that's going to be okay. But usually the person who's in charge of diversity, they may be black, or they may be white, or they may be Hispanic, but if they're not steeped in the historical aspects of what is going on and how it was fixed before, and what you need to do to fix it now, and what kind of changes have been made, and what's happening in the marketplace, and all that, if you're not versed in that, you're going to have a problem, your company is going to have a problem, or whatever you're allied with, the government, government agency is going to have a problem.

And so, now you have problems cropping up all over the place as a direct result of people not understanding the dynamics of what—or any kind of historical reference to what has gone on. Because many of these problems have gone on, you know, they were going on thirty or forty years ago. I've been in this business over fifty years, and we were dealing with some of this stuff forty years ago, thirty years ago!

DC: Right. And now you see it coming around again.

RB: You see it coming, making full circle, full circle, same kind of stuff. Because they have no reference. They don't know how to deal with it and they have no frame of reference on much of this stuff.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back. Do you mind getting just a brief couple of sentences of what your job is?

DC: Yeah. So, let's talk, if you could tell us a little bit about your time in Richmond and then coming back here, police officer, federal agent, and starting the company.

RB: Just give you a little thumbnail?

DC: Yeah, yeah. What's that?

Elaine Nichols: The name of the company.

DC: And the name of the company, yeah, of course. So, we'll start with just after high school, I guess.

RB: Yeah, okay. Well, after high school, I went to Virginia Union University. I stayed a year there, and then my grandparents, who raised me, got ill. I came back home and enrolled at North Carolina A&T State University. Spent a year there, and close to the end of that school year, I went to take a police examination as a—because I thought it was directly related to a class in sociology that I was taking, you know, under Dr. Robinson, who was the dean of the School of Social Work. And it was. I made an A in the course. I took the police exam, and it helped me generate some thoughts on what ought to be done.

And about two weeks after I took that exam, which was about the end of the school year, I had a meeting. The captain of police detectives came to my house, and he saw my grandmother. And I hadn't come home from school. The school was about out, and I hadn't come home from school that afternoon. So, when I got home from Greensboro, my grandmother said to me,

"Captain Johnson from the police station has been here, looking for you. And I asked him was anything wrong, and he said, 'No, no, we just want to talk to him.'" And so, my grandmother was, I mean, she was shaking [she was so nervous].

DC: [Laughs] She probably didn't believe them.

RB: You know, I mean, back then, you know, police come, police *captain* comes, *detectives* come to your house, man, that's something else!

DC: [Laughs] It's not a good thing.

RB: [Laughs] That's not a good thing! So, she said, "Well, he said that he wants you to call him as soon as you get in." So, I went out and called him, and I had to go across the street, because we didn't have a telephone. And I went across the street in Mrs. Dunlap's house and called him. And he said, "Robert, you're home?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Well, we're going to come down and see you." He said, "We just want to chat with you for a few minutes." I said, "Yes, sir. Well, I'll be here." He said, "Well, we're going to get in the car now and come on down there." So, the police station wasn't that far away. It's downtown, which was about maybe ten minutes, fifteen minutes away.

So, he came down. And I decided I'd stand out there on the porch, so that—my grandmother and my grandfather were in the house—so I [didn't have to] wait on him. [0:35:00] So, I stood out there, and they drove up, he and another police detective. Got out of the car, came up on the porch, and he introduced himself. He said, "I'm Captain Johnson from the police department." And he said, "We just want to talk to you for a few minutes." I said, "Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

He said, "Well, we want to offer you a job as a policeman." I said, "Offer me a job?" I said, "You're kidding?" He said, "No, sir. We're not kidding." He said, "You took the police

examination a couple of weeks ago and you made the highest mark that anybody ever made on the police examination. And we wanted to reach out to you and see if you want a job." I had just turned twenty-one years old! And I said, "Well, let me think about it. I'll let you know in the next day or two." He said, "Okay. Well, here's my card, and my phone number is on there. You call me."

And so, I went back in the house. And my grandmother, she was so nervous, and my grandfather. They said, "What did they want? You're not in any trouble, are you, Bobby?" I said, "No, ma'am." So, I said, "They wanted to offer me a job as a policeman." And my grandmother said, "Oh, you can't take a job as a policeman! You are in college! You've got to go ahead and finish college." And both of them were ill, and, you know, money was almost nonexistent. And I said, "Mama," I said, "I don't know. Let me think about it."

And so, school was about out. So, I went to school the next morning and I thought about it all of that day. And I came back home that afternoon and I went in and talked to my grandmother and grandfather. I told them, I said, "I think I'll take this job for a year or two, and then I'll go back to school. And maybe I can go to school at night and take some night classes." So, they went along with me. So, I took the job, [clears throat] and I stayed on the job for a couple of years.

DC: Um-hmm. Were there many black police officers in High Point then?

RB: I think there were maybe four, four or five. There were two black detectives and I think two or three officers. But I took the job.

DC: How were things in the police department then, in terms of race relations?

RB: They were fair. They weren't the best, but they were fair. You know, blacks were supposed to be patrolling black areas and all that, and weren't supposed to arrest any white

people. I mean, none of this was written down, now. And, of course, you know, I got right in the mix. Because I hadn't been there but about six months, and one day, my partner and I—he was a black guy—we got a call. It was a call on the radio. I mean, the radio goes out to everybody, all the cars. "All cars, there's a white male loose down off of Olga Street, and he's running. And all cars converge on that area, and we need to get him in tow," and so forth.

Anyway, [coughs] I went—we went down there. And I grew up in that area. [Laughs] That was the area I grew up in, so I knew all the branches and where you could hide and couldn't hide. So, I told my partner. He drove around. I told him where to let me off. He let me out, and I told him to drive around and wait at the other end of the branch over there. I said, "The only place that he can run and not expect to be caught is in that branch, because everywhere else everybody is going to see him." And sure enough, that's what this guy did. He jumped in that branch and was running up the branch.

And so, as soon as I got out of the car, and my guy drove off, I see this white guy running up through that branch. I mean, he was trucking up through that branch. So, I jumped down in the branch and I said, "Hey! Stop!" I said, "You're under arrest." And he says, "Nigger-boy, get out of my way! You better get out of my way. What are you talking about? You can't arrest me no way."

I said, "I can't?" So, I took my blackjack out, and I hit him with it, *bam*, you know, and drug him out. I said, "Come on, get up!" And I drug him out of the branch, because, you know, I figured anything could happen down in that branch, and they wouldn't find me or him until he's way away. So, I hit him a couple of times and drug him out of the branch. He said, "You better not hit me no more with that blackjack!" [0:40:00] And I hit him again! [Laughs]

I said, "You'd better get up and walk, because I'm going to do more than hit you. I'm going to take my pistol out and shoot you." So, he got—we got him up out of the branch. As soon as we got up out of the branch, there were police cars. I hadn't showed up on the other end, so they came back. All the cars converged; my partner and the white guys were there. And they took him. They came down there and took him, and they beat him up a little bit, [laughs] you know, and they threw him in the car.

And so, I had to go up there and sign a warrant against him at the police station. And, you know, I thought maybe they would, you know, they may say something, "Well, you know, you don't have to do this." But no. I went up there, I signed the warrant, and everything else, and they kept him in jail. And the judge, when the trial went down, the judge threw the book at him. He stayed in jail for three or four years.

But up until that time, I don't think there had been any kind of interfacing like that between whites and blacks. But nobody said anything. So, after that was over, you know, nobody—and this was in 1956, somewhere like that—and after that was over, nobody thought anything else about—nobody ever said you couldn't arrest a white. You know, it was never a written thing. But it was just sort of, you know, under the current that, you know, you don't arrest white people.

DC: But then, you saw that change.

RB: I saw that change, because I arrested several more white people. I know there was a white guy on Washington Street in a black area, and I was down there one day, just walking the street. And he was down there drunk and raising particular hell on the street. And so, I saw all of the blacks, looking out of the barbershop doors and everything, you know. And they were wondering what I was going to do, because I'm—you know, I'm just patrolling on foot that day.

And so, I'm walking down the street, and this guy is kind of woozy, he's about half-juiced and he's walking down the street, cursing and raising sand.

And then, he saw me. He looked up and he saw me and he called me a nigger, you know, and stuff. So, I said, "Okay." So, I crossed the street over there to where he was and I said, "You're under arrest." And he says, "Oh?" He called me a nigger again, "You can't arrest me! You better get out of my way." So, I took my blackjack out and hit him one time as hard as I could hit him. And he said, "Oh, you better not hit me," you know, and he fell down on one knee. He said, "Don't hit me anymore!"

So, I took my cuffs out and put the cuffs on him and strapped him up. And then, I told one of the guys in the barbershop, I said, "You get on your phone and call the station and tell them to send a car down here. I've got somebody under arrest." And before I could get him up and at'em, cars were—sirens were coming and cars were coming from every whichaway. They came down here and they threw him in the car. [Laughs] And they told me, said, "Bob, you better come on up here and sign a warrant against this rascal," you know. [Laughs] And I think they probably beat him up a little bit on the way up there, you know. [Laughs]

DC: Right.

RB: So, you know, it was that kind of a situation. So, it was an interesting—that was an interesting part of my life. And then, I got a job as a federal agent as a result of my being a policeman. I had helped some federal agents do some work, and so I got a job in New York, and my posted duty was New York City. I started working on the Mafia and ended up, you know, testifying in the Vito Genovese case, which was the biggest Mafia case ever. Several of those guys in that case were defendants of mine. And I worked in Canada on the guy who was the

biggest Mafia guy there. I worked up there, and I worked in Pennsylvania and New York, all over New York. I made a lot of cases, some of the biggest cases ever in the Bureau.

And then, after about three years, I decided I didn't want to do that anymore. I wanted to go into the public relations business. I had read about public relations, and it was something I wanted to do. And so, I read more books and so forth and so on. And one day, I came home and told my wife, "I want to go into the public relations business." And she said, "Oh, Robert, you don't know anything about public relations. All you know about is what you read in those books you've been reading." I said, "Yeah, but I know enough to know that this is what I want to do with my life." [0:45:00]

Four or five months later, I resigned my job, and we packed up and came back to North Carolina. And my district supervisor at the time in New York, he said, "You've been a great agent." He said, "Why do you want to mess this up?" He said, "You can stay here for twenty years and you can retire, and you'd be still a young man." He said, "If you go to North Carolina and open up a public relations business, you know, you can't get no clients." He said, "Your people can't even go in a restaurant."

DC: Hmm.

RB: He said, "What are you talking about you're going to open up a public relations business in North Carolina?" He said, "If you're going to do that, you ought to stay in New York." I said, "I'm going back to North Carolina to help deal with the problems there." And I said, "I'll be able to work everywhere from there." He said, "Okay." So, I came back, and the rest is history.

DC: Now, did you have a sense that—of the timing at that time, that there was something brewing that—?

RB: Oh, yeah. I *knew* that there were some things brewing. The sit-ins had occurred. And then, there were things—I was still reading, and that's what kept me abreast, you know, the *New York Times* and all these papers that I had been reading. I was living in New York so, you know, communication there was great. And I saw where all these things were happening all over the country. And I said, "Oh. Something's—this is not going to go away. There's going to be a change forevermore."

And so, I decided that that was where I wanted to be. I wanted to be in the arena. And so, I came back home to do that. I didn't feel like I could do that the way I wanted to do it in New York or somewhere like that. I needed to be in North Carolina. I needed to be where the action was going to be, in the South.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: [We're going again].

DC: Okay. And so, if you could tell us about—just the name of the company and when you started.

RB: Okay, I started at the end of 1960. December, 1960, I came back here and started this business. And then, you know, I pursued it. I had a 1960 Rambler car and I would go around. I made up a list of the companies. I made up a scenario of what I wanted to do and so forth, and how I wanted to do it. And then, I went around to see if I could go in these doors, go in the doors and see these people in these companies. And I got to see a lot of them. I'd drive different places.

And many times, I'd have to sleep in my car, whether I was—if it was in the South, I'd sleep in the car because I couldn't get a hotel. And if I was in the North, many times, if I was driving to New York or somewhere else, many times I wouldn't have the money. I'd have to have the money to save money for my gas. And so, I'd sleep in my car, and go to the Y and have

a shower and shave and change clothes. And I'd keep a nice pressed suit and shirt and tie, and they wouldn't know whether I came out of the Waldorf-Astoria, [laughs] or whether I came out of the back of my car. So, I would do that, and that's the way I pursued it. And I pursued it with some vigor and kept doing it.

DC: And the company name?

RB: The name of my company is B&C Associates. When I started out, I had a friend of mine, who had just—he had just come back from the service. He had been in service and he stayed with me. His name was Campbell, and he stayed with me for about three months. And after that time, he says, "Hey, look, I've got to go find myself a job. My wife says I've got to find a job." Said, you know, "I don't know whether this thing is going to work here or not." So, he left, and I just never changed the name. I said, "Hey, look, what's in a name anyway?" So, I kept the name and kept on moving, you know.

DC: Um-hmm. Now, so often, I think, you know, when we think of the Movement or making change, you know, we think of these big public events, and not what's happening behind, you know, behind the scenes or the closed doors or the money or the public relations that it takes. Could you talk a little bit about what it *does* take to make change happen, to make a movement?

RB: From a company point of view? Or from the civil rights point of view?

DC: Yeah, I mean, both, I think. And, yeah, and I'll ask some more questions, too, but let's start there.

RB: Well, you know, you couldn't have—say, from the civil rights point of view, I had access to a number of companies. I had some access to [0:50:00] some funding from these companies. And I was—I did some very innovative things, because what I would do if—for

instance, when I started working closely with Dr. King and Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, who was Dr. King's assistant and executive vice-president of the SCLC, he was literally running everything on a day-to-day basis, and they needed all kind of help. They told me upfront they needed help. And they did. They needed help with money. They needed logistical help, with this and that and another, opening doors.

And I used what I had. For instance, many of these companies that I worked with, they would budget so much money for this, and this, that, and the other. And they would tell me, "You have access to this and that and the other." And some of them, I didn't have any budget. I mean, I just did what I needed to do and billed them for it. So, what I would do is—if Dr. King and the Movement needed my help in many ways. And many times that was like funding a meeting. And the hotels, many times, would not go along with them for all kinds of reasons. They'd have them putting up this and that and the other. And I'd come in and say, "Okay, I'll pay this bill. I'll pay that bill." So, many of the movements that took place, I underwrote them.

And then, I would either suck up that bill myself, if I had the flexibility that month or during that period, or I would charge off to one of the major companies, Woolworth, or some of them. And then, I would tell them, you know, "I have to have this flexibility to do, you know, to work with everybody, and I want this flexibility. If you want to work with me, this is the way I work." So, I'd just charge it off as a business development kind of thing, and that was it.

DC: Now, what would a Woolworth's—you talked about how, really, one of your first or your first major client early opened the doors to a lot of other clients. But what did they want from you? I mean, how did they put that into—what did they want you to do for them? I mean, they saw the winds of change, right, but what did that mean, exactly?

RB: Well, they didn't know what it meant.

DC: [Laughs]

RB: Seriously. You know, they didn't understand, because nothing like this had ever happened in America before. *Nothing* like this had ever happened in our country before! There was nothing that they could compare it with. They couldn't go to the Harvard Business School and say, "Hey, look, how do you put this—what is the equation? What kind of equation do you use on this one?" They couldn't do that. And so, you know, I was plowing up new ground. There was nothing to compare it to. There were no books written on this, because nothing like this had ever happened in America before.

So, I had to use my own judgment, my own ingenuity and so forth. And my ingenuity told me, and what my grandmother raised me, she said, "Just do the right thing." And my grandmother was living then, and I would talk to her many times, tell her, say, "Mama, I've got to deal with this and that and the other." And she would tell me, she said, she would tell me over and over again, she said, "Martin Luther King, Jr. is a wonderful man, and those fellows, Bobby, they are wonderful people." Said, "You need to continue to help them all you can." She said, "Just do the right thing."

And that's what I was trying to do: the right thing. And I *knew* they were on solid ground. I *knew* that that was a winning cause. They had a lot of detractors, many in the black community and a lot of them in the white community, who did not like them, and so forth. But they were my *friends*, and I had to figure out all over again, time and time again, how I could be helpful to them, how I could open doors, and how I could change the attitudes of major business people in the business community about what was happening and how this would be good for our country.

And I made speeches to different groups, different heads of companies who would be meeting at the Westchester Country Club or at other places around the country, [0:55:00]

different companies, on race relations, on what do you do in a crisis situation and how you should handle it, and how change, how to deal with change, and all that. I mean, these were all new things in America that had never happened in America before! Never! You know, I mean, you know, since slavery. Slavery was one thing, but then the sixties comes, and between the sixties, between the 1960s and the 1860s, you know, you had Reconstruction and you had this and that and the other, and part of slavery. But there was nothing, *nothing*, that they could compare themselves with that would prepare them for this, for what was happening at that time. So, all this was new ground.

DC: Now, did you have to sell them on the power of the black consumer dollar?

RB: Oh, yeah! That was a constant sell. And many times, that would be the argument that I would have. Because I would do research, and then I hired some professors at A&T. There was a man, his name was Dr. Sidney Evans, who was an economist at A&T, he became one of my principal consultants. He was consulting with me for twenty-five years. And he knew a lot about—there were other men like Sidney who I hired to work with me, who wrote papers and did all kind of things to say to the business community, "Here. Here's what the black market is. Here's what you're dealing with, and here's the power in it," not just from the standpoint of the economic power, but power of the black church, power of the black schools, all kinds of latent power within the black community that was going to come and rise up. And you had to deal with this.

And that was what I was selling. I was selling that, "Hey, look, this is coming. Whether you want it, whether you like it or dislike it, makes no difference. For the good of your company and for the good of America, you have to be in front of this. You have to deal with this. You have to make a way." Because, see, companies like Woolworth, they didn't even have a black

secretary in the Woolworth headquarters building! But they had stores all over the black community in Chicago, New York, They had Woolworth's stores everywhere, in California, in Watts, and everywhere. They had Woolworth's stores *everywhere*. And they had black assistant managers, many times, in black areas, but very few, if any, and almost no black managers of the stores in black communities!

So, I told them, "We've got to dispense with this! We've got to go find us some black managers, we've got to train them, we've got to bring them in. We've got to put people on the board of directors of the company, black people, you know. You've got to put people in the executive offices of the company. You've got to have black buyers and all that." We did *all* of that at the Woolworth Company. And because we did it there, and they were the biggest, the others kind of took on—they didn't have too much of a choice, because many of these guys, who were on the board, they were the most powerful businessmen in America. So, if they—you know how business is. They see one doing it, and the others almost are going to fall in place. And they saw what was happening to a lot of them who didn't fall in place. You know, there were boycotts, there were demonstrations, there were all kinds of things. Because Woolworth's was hit very hard.

And, you know, the strange thing about the whole Woolworth thing is that we started working with them in 1961, probably about July or August of 1961. Four or five years after we started working with them, and they were supposed to be, in terms of the black community, in terms of companies, the devil reincarnated. But about five years later, Woolworth got two or three awards for being one of the leading companies, in terms of civil rights, in terms of integration, and all that, because we integrated the executive office, we integrated the board.

[1:00:00] You know, we integrated—you look at Woolworth's stores around the country. We integrated that.

We even had—there was a huge Woolworth's store in Harlem that was *owned* by blacks. We changed the ownership. They had the store, when it was burned out from the riots and stuff, we had the store turned around, and we put it in a limited corporation, where the store and building were owned by blacks. It was a sale/leaseback deal, where Woolworth's took a long-term lease, and the land and everything was owned by black people. We did that in several communities all across the country. And now, you know, it seems like we've gone backwards, because you're doing very little of that now, with black people. You know, other people are still doing it and all that—sale/leaseback deals, and this, that and the other—but you don't know a lot of black people involved. We started this all *way* back.

DC: So, Woolworth's knew—or I guess I should put this in the form of a question. So, did Woolworth's know that they really had a problem on their hands, just the fact that their name became sort of synonymous with the pickets?

RB: Oh, yeah.

DC: And that they had to turn that around, in some way.

RB: I think they understood. They understood. There were some people who didn't want to deal with it, I think, but they understood.

DC: What kinds of resistance did you meet when you took on these projects for the big corporations?

RB: I met with resistance, all kinds of resistance. I met with resistance in the black community. I met with resistance in the white community. For instance, in Birmingham, many of the guys who—when Dr. King was trying to get the stores down there to integrate and so forth.

Well, I was working through Woolworth and some other companies. Of course, Woolworth is the biggest. Woolworth said, yeah, they'll do it, but the rest of them did not want to integrate their lunch counters. They didn't want to integrate their luncheon rooms and that kind of stuff. The big department stores, they didn't want to hire no blacks, and this, that and the other.

So, Woolworth was the big daddy in the National Retail Association at the time, and that was the big daddy of all of them. They all were members of that. And so, Woolworth had me to meet with those people and give them the facts of life and everything. And so, when Dr. King and Dr. Wyatt Walker went to them and talked to them about—then Woolworth passed the word down that they were going to integrate, and they were going to not only integrate, but they were going to take the business. They were going to figure out a way how to take the business, *all* the business, and have people coming to [laughs] their stores and so forth. And so, the dollar sign started computing with the guys, and all of a sudden, everybody starts coming together. So, they got the message. The dollar is up there somewhere. They got the message and they all agreed that there would be a certain time when all of them would come together, all of the stores would integrate.

Same way with the hotels. I remember when Dr. King and those integrated the hotels in Memphis, Tennessee, for instance. In Memphis, there was a hotel called the Peabody. That was the main hotel there. It may still be there. It was an old, nice hotel.

DC: It is.

RB: Where the ducks walk up and all that.

DC: Yep. [Laughs]

RB: So, Dr. Wyatt Walker called me one day, and he said, "Bob, we've got a tentative agreement with the Peabody and the downtown hotels that they're going to integrate. And we're

going to have a big meeting there at some point in the next couple of months. But we've got to test the hotel to see if they're going to do the right thing first." And he said, "And Dr. King wants you to go there and see if they'll let you in, and so forth." [Laughs] So, I said, "Well, okay, if he really wants me to do it."

So, I flew to Memphis, and some of the guys met me, some of the SCLC guys met me, and they wanted to see what was happening. So, I went there and went to the counter and told them I wanted a suite, wondered what kind of [1:05:00] big suite you have. So, they gave me a big suite, signed me up. I went up there and took the suite. And then I came back and I met with some of the guys. I said, "Man, all y'all come on up!" Said, "We're going to have some drinks and dinner up there." It was a big suite! The first time a black had ever had a suite up there. But they wanted to test it to see what was going on, you know.

But, I mean, I used to do so many different things, all over the place, all over the place. I know that there were some things going on in Richmond. And Dr. King wanted to make sure that they were worked out okay, and we got in the middle of that. And Wyatt Walker was a great tactician. He was a brilliant guy in the movement. And I don't think he ever really got the credit he deserved, because he was there during those difficult days. He left later on and went to be an executive in a publishing company in New York and took a large church there and so forth. And he's still living, and he has—he's been ill the last few years, and he lives in Virginia.

But there were just—there were so many things going on, you know, that we were a part of and participating in in some way. The Poor People's Campaign, Dr. King was planning on that when he was killed, you know, the Poor People's Campaign. This was in 1968. '68 was an unbelievable perilous year. Because in '68, I'm working with Dr. King in the Movement and so

forth. We were doing a lot of things. We were holding meetings. We were planning for the Poor People's Campaign and all of that.

And then, Dr. King is killed. And I go with Mrs. King to Memphis to pick up his body, you know. And then, we had Dr. King's funeral. And the night before the funeral, I had a big suite at the Hyatt Regency in Atlanta, where we met with a lot of people, people like—Sidney Poitier was there; Robert Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, who I had met on several occasions, he was there with his wife, Ethel—and just a whole host of people who came to the funeral, talk about where we were going in the country, and all of that. And then, later on after that, Earl Graves, who had worked with me in the Bureau, and we'd been friends for a long time, called me and said, you know, "We want to push Robert Kennedy's campaign on up to a new level," and I started working with them on that. And then, a few months later, Bobby Kennedy is killed in California.

And all this happened in 1968. And then, we're still trying to plan the Poor People's Campaign. And then, a few weeks later, one of my guys who's working for the Nixon campaign, who's working for Ray Bliss, who was the chairman of the Republican National Committee, a black guy, Clarence Townes, wanted me to work with him, give him advice and counsel on what he ought to be doing and all that kind of stuff. And I agreed to do that two days a week. Two days ran into five days, five days into seven days, and I was handling a lot of different problems for them.

And then, after a few weeks, I was called in by Bob Finch, who was running Nixon's campaign. He was the lieutenant governor of California and chairman of the Nixon campaign. He told me that Mr. Nixon wanted me to be on the plane with him, that he had been watching what I'd been doing for his campaign, and he wanted me to travel with him.

So, I came back home, got myself together, and went back, and met the campaign in Ohio, and we went across the state on the last whistle stop train tour that any president has taken in America. Nixon took it across Ohio. And that's where we saw the sign with the little girl holding up the sign, "Bring Us Together." And that became a campaign theme for us. And I worked and traveled with Nixon until the end of the campaign. [1:10:00]

DC: And what did you think of Nixon when you first met him or got involved in the campaign at that level?

RB: I thought he was smart and many times intuitive and insensitive to a great degree. I didn't consider him—a lot of people wanted to tag him as a racist. I think he wasn't a racist. He was everything but a racist. And then, I got to even know him better after the campaign was over. And after the campaign was over, I told them that I was—they wanted me to go to help put the government together, [coughs] down in Key Biscayne, and I told them I was going back to North Carolina and put my business back together.

JB: I'll take a little pause.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

DC: Now, you'd been—I mean, you'd been working through your company for Nixon, right? So, you were getting—were you getting paid for that? That wasn't volunteer work.

RB: It wasn't—it wasn't my regular pay that, you know. I think they paid me something. It wasn't much.

DC: Okay. Now, when you worked with the Movement, was that all just on your own dime?

RB: Oh, that was on my own. That was totally—I was raising money and giving them money. [Laughs]

DC: Okay. [laughs]

RB: [Laughs] I wasn't getting paid. I was giving them money. But it was something that I wanted to do. I felt that I needed to do it. I was making the contacts. I had the contacts and I thought one dovetailed into another, and everybody could learn something, and that progress could be made.

DC: Um-hmm. Now, did King first reach out to you, or how did you make that connection with King and some of the other Movement leaders?

RB: [Coughs] I was having lunch in Atlanta with a friend of mine, Stan Scott, who ran the *Atlanta Daily World* black newspaper. And he introduced me to Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, who was Dr. King's righthand man. And Reverend Walker says to me, he said, "You know, you're in the public relations business." He said, "We need your help." He said, "Why don't you come by the office when you finish your lunch and meet with Dr. King?" Said, "Dr. King is in town." Said, "He would love to meet you." So, I said, "Yeah, fine, no problem." I said, "I like what he's doing." That's how it happened.

I went by the office and meet Dr. King. Dr. King says, "Hey, look. We need your help," you know. "We need—we're trying to raise money and we need the best minds we can get. We're just trying to make it through here." That's how we met.

DC: Interesting. Yeah.

RB: [Coughs]

DC: So, jumping back to President Nixon, then, you were talking about once the government started to—they started to form that government and asked you to be a part of it.

RB: Oh, yeah. And so, I initially, you know, I said, "No, I can't do that. I've got to go back and make some money." And so, every day I would get a call from Ron Ziegler or somebody in Nixon's office, asking me about this and what they ought to do about this, that and the other. So, one day, I got a call from Haldeman. This was about the third or fourth week in November of '68. And Haldeman says, "Bob, I'm calling you because the Old Man wants to see you, and he wants to see you right away." I said, "Well, I've got to come to New York anyway." They were in New York at the Pierre Hotel. That's where the transition office was set up. I said, "I'll come by tomorrow. I'll come on up and come by."

So, I flew to New York and went to the Pierre. Haldeman met me, and he said, "I'll take you on up." So, he took me up to Nixon's suite. Herbert Brownell and Bill Rogers were in there. Brownell had been Attorney General under Eisenhower, and Rogers was going to be Secretary of State. He hadn't—Nixon hadn't named a cabinet, didn't even have a real staff at that time. And so, when I walked in the room, and Haldeman says to Mr. Nixon, "Oh, I didn't know you had people in here." He said, "I've got Bob Brown with me, and we'll just wait [1:15:00] outside until you finish." He said, "Oh, no, no, no." He said, "These guys are leaving. I've got to talk to Bob." He said, "Bring Bob on in. I want to introduce him to these guys."

So, I came in, and he introduced me. He said, "This Bob Brown. I want you all to meet him, because you all are going to be seeing a lot of him." He said, "He's going to be one of my principal assistants in the White House." Now, we hadn't even had a conversation. Hadn't even had a conversation, and that's the way he introduced me to Brownell and Bill Rogers. And so, they left. And then, Haldeman says, "Do you want me to stick around here?" And he said, "Oh, no, I want to meet with Bob."

So, the two of us met for a long time, maybe forty-five minutes or more, and a lot of the time, he's telling me about different things about the blacks that he knew. And he started telling me this story about E. Frederick Morrow, who was in the White House when he was vice president. And he said, "Bob, I know you've probably heard or you might know E. Frederick Morrow." He said, "Fred Morrow was a top-grade guy. He was brilliant smart." He said, "But they had him sitting, as the black sitting beside the door." He said, "They didn't give him any real responsibility." He said, "That was wrong. He was a brilliant man." He said, "He was probably smarter than any of the guys that Eisenhower had around him." And he said, "They just didn't give him a break."

He said, "But you don't have to worry about that. You have total access to me." And he says, "In Washington, access is *everything*. It's *everything*." And he said, "If you've got my confidence and my access, that's all you need." He said, "It don't make no difference what your title is. If you've got access, you've got it all." And I found out he was right, and he never changed that. The whole time—I was at the White House for four years and three months, and the whole time I was at the White House, there was never a time, never a time when anybody overruled me—I mean, there were times when people tried—about anything that I did there, including the President. And there were some very sticky situations.

There was one of them where one of the big associations who had given the President a lot of money in his campaign, they wanted to change some of the stuff that I was doing, because I was doing the whole black economic development thing and all this. I was getting blacks involved with contracts and grants and stuff that they had never been involved with before. And that was stuff that they had control over, particularly these contracts. And they thought I was treading on their ground. And they told Haldeman they wanted to see the President about, talk to

him about firing me, because Haldeman came and told me. He says, "You know, these guys," he said, "you better tread lightly," or whatever. And I said, "I'm just doing what I think the President wants me to do."

So, Haldeman says, "I've got to go tell the President what they want." I said, "Well, tell him! No problem." So, he went and told the President what they wanted, and Haldeman called me back. He said, "Bob, the President wants you to see them." He said, "But the President said he's not going to see him. They have to come to see you."

DC: [Laughs]

RB: And these were guys that had given him a lot of money. And they came to see me. And I told them, I said, "Hey, look, we want to work this out. But it's not going to be the same thing as it's always been." I said, "We want to include some minorities, some women in this deal, these deals here now." I said, "You all had it all, but we can't do that. This is in a different kind of America where we're going to be running here right now." And the President backed me up. And, you know, and those guys became friends. I mean, you know, they—because I was going to take more than I took, you know.

DC: Right. Now, did the President give you a brief as to what he exactly he wanted to see?

RB: Oh, yeah, he talked about—he told me in that initial meeting up there in the Pierre Hotel, he said, "Look, you know, I've talked about—" in the campaign he talked about black capitalism. And he said, "You know, I made a speech about blacks being in business and doing this and that and the other." He said, "But I don't really," he said, "You know more about this kind of thing than I do." He said, "You've worked with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. You've worked with civil rights. You've traveled all over the country with different black groups and

worked [1:20:00] with the church groups and the schools." [Coughs] He said, "You need to handle this." He said, "I'm looking to you to deal with this."

And he said something else that was very important to me. He said, "Whenever we have a cabinet meeting," he said, "you will be at all the cabinet meetings." He said, "You will meet—every time the cabinet meets, you will meet." He said, "Rosemary [will help you]." He said, "There will probably be five or six senior staff in the cabinet meetings." Every cabinet meeting that was held, if I was in town, or even if I was out of town and could be back there by the time [it met], I was in the cabinet meetings, all of them. I had a chair with my name on it.

DC: And your title was—?

RB: Special Assistant to the President.

DC: Special Assistant—

RB: And not only did I have a chair, [clears throat] but back then you could do some other things. I brought my chair home. My chair is in my office down the road over there, with my name on the back of it.

DC: Oh, that's great.

EN: Let's take a break.

DC: That's—want to take a little break?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, start again. How did you end up going to South Africa in the first place? Tell us the story.

RB: [Eating] Well, I went to South Africa. I had gone there on a couple of other occasions with Ambassador Doug Holladay, who was a special ambassador to South Africa. I had also gone there to take about [clears throat] twenty black college presidents to South Africa

who wanted to go. And the South African government gave us visas to [get on in], because it was hard to get a visa.

So, then Mrs. King called me one day, and she said, "Bob." She was a very close friend. So, she said, "Bob, I want to go to South Africa, and you know all those people over there, because we can't get a visa." She said, "My people have tried to get a visa."

So, I called Piet Koornhof, who was the ambassador from South Africa to the United States. And I had met Piet at a prayer breakfast in Washington, and he considered himself a strong devout Christian and so forth. So, I told him I wanted to see him. He said, "Okay, you come and have lunch with me, Bob." I said, "Okay." So, I went to the embassy and had lunch with him. I said, "You know, Mrs. King, Martin Luther King's widow, says she wants to go to South Africa, and she wants to take some of her staff with her, but she can't get a visa to get in the country." And I said, "This is not the Christian way."

DC: Hmm.

RB: "You know, you need to do something else with this." I said, "I don't know what this is, Piet. You know, you're supposed to be my Christian brother, but the country's doing this kind of thing." He said, "Oh, Bob, no! No, that's not right! You know, Mrs. King wants to go, we will let her. We'll have her visa." He said, "You get me all the information, and we'll get it worked out." I said, "Okay." So, I called Coretta, and Coretta has one of the staff to get all the information on all of the people who want to go. Got the information, and within a few days, we had the visas for everybody who wanted to go.

Now, the other problem was, there were a number of people Mrs. King wanted to go didn't have no money. I mean, you know, we were doing it under the banner of the King Center, which she had established. And they didn't have any money. So, I had to go out and raise the

money to make the trip. So, anyway, we went over there. And one of the things that she said she wanted to do was to go see President Botha to see if we could get him to let Nelson Mandela out of jail. She said, "I really think I can do this, Bob." I said, "Okay, no problem."

DC: This is what—what year is this, approximately?

RB: This was about 1986 maybe, something like that..

DC: Okay.

RB: So, we went to South Africa. [1:25:00] And when we got there, we met with a group of the people in South Africa, like Dr. Boesak, and others. And they all were urging us not to meet, that Mrs. King shouldn't meet with President Botha. And we said, "Okay." And Mrs. King and some of the people that she had taken with her, you know, said they were rethinking meeting with President Botha. So, after we got there, we stayed up all night discussing with some of the leadership in South Africa and some of the people who were leaders in the U.S., saying that—and most of them came to the conclusion that we shouldn't meet with President Botha.

And that's one of the reasons Mrs. King was over there. She was over there for a couple of other reasons. And I think one of the other reasons was Bishop Tutu was being made an archbishop at the time, and she was going to attend. We were all going to attend his ceremony. And nobody wanted Mrs. King to meet with President Botha. She wanted to meet with President Botha to ask for him to get Mandela out of jail, let Mandela out of jail. Well—and, see, this is something that never really has surfaced, but most of the people in that meeting, they didn't want Mrs. King to meet with President Botha.

So, we thrashed that out over all night long, I mean, literally all night. It was daybreak, and we still had—were talking about this. And so, Mrs. King decided. She said, "Bob, I don't want to go against the wishes of the people here on the ground in dealing with this." She said,

"I'm not going to do this." She said, "I'm going to write a letter to President Botha and tell him that I can't meet with him," and so forth.

So, she wrote the letter. And, of course, who gets picked to take the letter to the state house? Okay, so, [laughs] I told them I would do it after they picked me. So, I went over there to deliver the letter to tell them—the letter told them that she wasn't going to be meeting with him, because he had agreed to meet with her. And he wouldn't meet with anybody, but he had agreed to meet with her! And she was going to ask for Mandela's release, but she—so, anyway, I took the letter. And I went through the gate, they let me through the gate, and I went to President Botha's office.

And this guy met me, one of his assistants met me. And I delivered the letter, and I said, "Please give this letter from Mrs. King to President Botha." And I said, "She deeply regrets that she could not meet with him at this time." And he looked at me and he said, "Mr. Brown, we certainly appreciate Mrs. King being here, and we appreciate you delivering this letter to President Botha, telling him what Mrs. King's wishes were." And he said, "We respect her wishes." And I said, "Thank you very much, and we look forward to maybe greeting you again sometime." So, I turned around and left.

So, I went back, and Mrs. King says, "Bob," she said, "one of the things that I need to do before we leave this country, I need to go see Winnie Mandela." Now, we were in Cape Town. Johannesburg is two and a half hours away by plane. And so, we got in touch with Mrs. Mandela. Mrs. Mandela said, "Yeah, I'd love to see Mrs. King." So, we flew to Johannesburg and went to Soweto to spend some time with Mrs. Mandela. So, we're sitting there talking, talking, talking about everything. And so, Mrs. King asked Mrs. Mandela, "What would you—what would be most important to you and Mr. Mandela for us that we could do for you all now?"

And Mrs. Mandela was loud and clear. She said, "The thing that Nelson and I want most is for our children [1:30:00] to be able to go back to America and go to school." She said, "There have been a number of people over here who promised that, but nobody has ever delivered." Said, you know, "People promise in America, and you never hear from them anymore." That's what Mrs. Mandela told Mrs. King.

So, Mrs. King looked at me and she said, "Bob, is this something that we can do?" I knew what she meant, you know, [laughs] is it something that I can do? So, I told her. I told Mrs. Mandela and I told Mrs. King, I said, "Yes, I think we can do it." And I said, "But what we need, what I need, is I need a letter from Mrs. Mandela to me personally, asking me to do this, and then I'll set it into motion."

And sure enough, about two or three weeks later, I get a letter from Mrs. Mandela, asking me to do this! And so, I set it into motion. I called the president of Boston University, who is a close friend, and I was on that board. I'm still on that board of trustees of the university. And he agreed to do—he agreed to take care of the tuition and so forth. But I would have to take care of all the other expenses: getting them over here, housed, a van because they had Mandela's three grandchildren at the time. There was four, because she had another child [after she got here].

And they lived here seven years, seven years, and I paid for it personally. Not some grant I got from a foundation or from a company—from RJB personally. And it was a very expensive proposition, but it was one that I did because I thought we owed it to them. And I had told Mrs. King, who was one of my closest friends, that I would do it. And I did it.

Now, that young woman who came over here is now the South African ambassador to Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay. She's the only person, only Mandela child or grandchild who is in an official position with the government, and that's Zenani.

DC: Um-hmm. Incredible story.

RB: So, you know, you never know how things are going to turn out when you're pursuing different kinds of activity. But South Africa was a real challenge.

DC: And you met him as soon as he got out of prison?

RB: I met him inside the jail.

DC: Oh, really?

RB: I have some material that I'll share with you. But I met him inside the jail. They allowed Mrs.—Mrs. Mandela says, "Look." When I agreed to take them over, bring them back with me, I went over there. And Mrs. Mandela said, "Before you leave this country again, you have to see Nelson Mandela." I said, "Well, nobody has seen him in twenty-some years. How you think they're going to let me see him?" I said, "They won't even let you all see him but fifteen minutes at a time, and you all travel two and a half hours down there to Cape Town from Johannesburg."

She said, "Well, I'm going to try. I'm going to petition to President Botha for you to see him, because you're taking—you're the guardian of his children." And I thought it was a hopeless, useless, hopeless kind of thing for her to do, because I knew they weren't going to do nothing.

The night before I was to leave, I got a call from Neil van Heerden, who was one of the top assistants to President Botha. And he called me on the telephone at the hotel and he said, "Mr. Brown," and he said what his name was. He said, "I'm calling for President Botha. He asked me to call you to tell you that you have permission. He's granting you permission to see Mr. Mandela tomorrow at Pollsmoor Prison if you still want to do it."

I couldn't believe it. Nobody had seen Nelson Mandela in twenty-some years, and these people are granting me permission to go to Pollsmoor Prison to see him inside the prison? I mean, I couldn't—I mean, it was just so—I figured maybe they want to kill me or something! Because, you know, there were a lot of killings and bombings and everything going on then. And so, I said, "Oh, my goodness!" So, I prayed over it, you know, and I asked God to give me the strength and the guidance and to give me the courage to go ahead and do this. [1:35:00] So, I went down there. I carried Zenani and Prince Muzi, her husband, with me.

And so, we got to the gate, and, you know, they had all these guns and things there. And I said, "Oh, my God! This may be it!" So, the guy brought out his big old pad, and he says, "Oh, you're Mr. Brown?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, we are going to open the gate, and you go to that red brick building up there. And somebody will come and meet you at the door as soon as you get there."

So, we walked through the gate, walked up to this red brick building, and as soon as I got to the bottom of the steps of that brick building, only about three or four steps, this big white guy comes out. And he grabs my hand and he says, "Mr. Brown," he said, "I'm the chief warden here, and you—what you're doing for Mr. Mandela is a marvelous thing for his family. And we all want to congratulate you for what you're doing for Mr. Mandela and his family." He said, "I'm having him brought down from his cell now. And you go into that big room over there in the corner, and you sit in there, and you talk to him as long as you want to."

Now, in twenty-some years, *nobody*—his family, who they're the only people they would allow to see him—they would only let him be seen for fifteen or twenty minutes, and then sometimes they'd give them an extra fifteen minutes. And they would travel two and a half hours by plane! And I sat there and talked to him about two hours. It was absolutely mind-boggling!

He told me what it would take to make peace in South Africa. He talked about a lot of things. I have a memo that I wrote—as soon as I got out of there, I was scratching down notes—I have a memo that I wrote as soon as I got outside the gate, and I'll give you a copy of it, the memo that I wrote about our meeting.

DC: Okay.

RB: And then, they let me go back. The next year, they let me go back to see him again. But by this time, they were talking to him, you know. They had never really had any relationship or talked to him. They wouldn't let anybody else talk to him. But after I saw him and I wrote this memo, and I passed it on to Mrs. Mandela. She gave it to the ANC. I passed it on to George Schultz, who was Secretary of State. I passed it on to President Botha. I gave Piet Koornhof and those a copy of it, so they could send it to President Botha and so forth. So, everybody had it. Our side had it, their side had it, the ANC had it. Everybody had the memo about what Mr. Mandela was talking about. And so, after that, they had started little conversations with him.

DC: And things started rolling.

RB: One thing led into another and another. So, you just never know what God has in store for you and how he's using you. As my grandmother used to say, "Just let God have his way." Let him use you, and things will turn out okay. But it was an unbelievable time down there in South Africa.

DC: Amazing.

RB: It was amazing. And then, you know, there were other things that happened during that period. I went into most of the black townships all over the country. And I would go to the schools, because I figured that was—the schools and see if there were any libraries. Well, there

are very few, if almost no libraries, because they wouldn't let them have books. So, what I did, is I decided to start taking books and sending books back to South Africa. [Coughs]

And so, as a result, I would take truckloads. And I got permission from the South African government that I could bring shoes and clothes. I didn't tell them I was bringing books. So, in every box of shoes and clothes, I'd have a half a box of shoes and clothes and a half a box of books, all kinds of schoolbooks. And so, I started doing that on a scale, [1:40:00] just—and I would be going there—I'd make it my point to go there. Get the books, and then I'd get a truck from here, and have the truck loaded up.

And I had got permission from the South African government to put those books on South Africa Airways, and they didn't charge me anything for putting them on there. So, I'd put those books in the clothes, because I told them they were shoes and clothes. And if they'd look in the box, that's what they would see, shoes and clothes, but the other half of the box were a number of books. So, I did that. For several years, I did that. I took books [coughs] into—

DC: And you still do that, right?

RB: And still do that. We set up over three hundred libraries in South Africa, over three hundred. We set them up in the Zululand and Ulundi, where the king of the Zulus, who is also a good friend. And, you know, before you leave, I'll show you some pictures of some of that, you know.

DC: Great.

RB: And we set up all over South Africa, because books are still precious in Africa, not just in South Africa. In Africa, books are like gold. A kid gets a book, and they start to cry. And we're shredding books over here.

DC: Right.

RB: We're shredding books by the millions, you know, recycling them and that kind of thing, when these people, tens of millions of kids, don't have any books. And they think a book is like a piece of gold. They cry many times when they get a book.

DC: Okay.

RB: Somehow or another, we're going to have to figure that one out.

DC: Um-hmm. How's your voice?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling again.

DC: Are you ready to start again? So, maybe let's start there, if you would, talk a little bit about President Nixon and his character and how he felt about working on race relations. But I also want to really hear about the work that you were able to do in stimulating the growth of minority businesses in that time.

RB: Well, first of all, I think a lot of people have put together in their own minds that President Nixon was a devout racist. He was a devout Quaker, and I don't know any racist Quakers. I know that sometimes President Nixon used some language that he probably regretted or shouldn't have used. But many people do that. But many people didn't have a camera on them when they were doing it, you know. Many presidents have done that, and many top people. I've been around a few when they've used some bad language. So, he's not the only one who's done that. But he's the only one who had that camera on him, who you could show. And so, he was condemned for it. But he was not a racist.

He was a person, if he believed in you or if he believed in a cause, he was totally for it. And the whole thing of minority business enterprise. He wanted to have blacks and Hispanics and others to get a—have a shot, because he felt very strongly that if you don't get a shot within

the business community, or in business in general, that this whole country was built on that. And if you were not involved in that, then it was going to be very limited, in terms of what you were going to be able to do in America. And so, he wanted that opened up, and my charge was to do that.

I went to Wall Street. I went to the biggest banks in the country, to Citigroup, which was the biggest bank at the time, and met with their chairman and CEO and vice-chairman about the whole minority enterprise program and what we expected of them and their bank to do. They agreed to work with us. We organized a National Commission on Minority Enterprise. We put the most powerful people in America in it.

We designated as chairman of that group Mr. Roche, who was Jim Roche, who was the chairman and CEO of General Motors, which at the time was the largest corporation and, indeed, in the world at that time. He agreed to chair it. [1:45:00] Not only did he agree to chair it, but he got other industrial people, other automobile manufacturers to come on in and give dealerships to blacks all over the country. When we went to the White House in late 1968, ’69, there were only—I think there were only two, no more than three blacks in America who owned dealerships. And there were very few who were working in many of these major manufacturers, you know, like Chrysler, GM, Ford. Very few were working—almost none were working in the executive positions in these companies, in the top executive.

Now, I mean, it was—people seem to think that, you know, because you have some blacks there now in some top positions and all that, on boards, and so forth, that all this just happened by osmosis. It did not happen by osmosis. It happened because we worked at it and made it happen. You know, I met—Jim Roche became a close personal friend of mine. And when I left the White House, he wanted to expand what they were doing, in terms of minority

enterprise, and General Motors hired my company for several years to go out and spread the word and to get them involved in a whole range of different kinds of activities, with minorities across the country.

So, there were—you know, it just didn't happen, you know, just because I was there, and I was sitting up there as a black person. It makes no difference, whether you're a black person sitting where I was sitting as a staff person, or if you're a black person sitting as President of the United States, if you want some stuff to happen, you've got to work at it. You know, you can't just wish it to happen. You've got to *make* it happen. And that's what we were doing. That's what we did.

And that's what the Nixon years were all about. President Nixon, in 1972, when he ran for reelection, he got twenty percent or more of the *black vote*, and he was supposed to be, according to some history books and some people, he was supposed to be the devil reincarnated to blacks. No Republican candidate since 1972 has gotten as many black votes as Richard Nixon got in 1972, no candidate! How did that happen, when he was supposed to be the devil reincarnated?

We had Jim Brown, we had Sammy Davis, Jr., [clears throat] we had the president of the Baptist conventions, several Baptist conventions, we had some of the top ministers in the country and bishops of different churches, and so forth, who came out in support of President Nixon in 1972. That's how it happened. Because they knew we were working closely with them. They knew that we had had a major effort to get major money into black colleges. We got the first major money into black colleges *ever* in America. Richard Nixon did that.

No president before or since has met with all of the top blacks that he had in top positions in the administration. We would meet with all of them at least a year, sometimes twice a year.

And people who were in the group were people like Jim Farmer, who was Assistant Secretary of HEW, who was the head of CORE, at that time, was considered the most radical organization there was on the scene. He was conducting massive demonstrations and everything else. But we brought him into the administration as an Assistant Secretary of HEW, in a top job, where he could make things happen, where he *did* make things happen.

We had other people there, the head of the Woman's Bureau in the Labor Department. We had Art Fletcher there, who was the Assistant Secretary of Labor, who came up with the Philadelphia Plan and all those things to right the ship, with regards to employment. All those things started under Richard Nixon, all those things. And we had people in those jobs, who came en masse, we had them en masse in the White House. I have pictures here to show you what we were doing and who we were meeting with.

And these pictures were to go out to the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times,* and all that, about these meetings [1:50:00] and all this stuff that was going on. And I don't think—not one, as I recall, not one major newspaper printed any of these pictures. Not one major newspaper. Now, something's wrong with that. Not one major newspaper printed any of these pictures of all of this that happened all over the place.

So, there were so many different things going on. Job situations, EEOC, the first major funding in revamping of EEOC to take it to another level so that it could be more effective was done under Richard Nixon. And Bill Brown, who's a big lawyer who made a lot of strides in America, was chairman of it for four years. He's a Philadelphia lawyer, one of the top lawyers in the country, black lawyer. And there were other things like that that happened over and over again, where we brought top people, civil rights leaders, and others. Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young. The President met with Whitney Young many times. The President met with Roy

Wilkins, who was the head of the NAACP, many times. We did all kinds of things as a result of their suggestions and so forth.

DC: What about the federal government patronizing black businesses? Was that a priority?

RB: That was a big priority. And that was something that I pursued at a White House level and that Secretary Maurice Stans, who was Secretary of Commerce, he and I worked very closely together on that. He had the responsibility because we set up the Office of Minority Business Enterprise within the Commerce Department. And we pursued that with all of the departments of the government.

DC: Right.

RB: And not only did we pursue it, in terms of contracts and grants, but along with all the other things I was doing, I made sure that the Defense Department, that the other departments that had a lot of money, like the General Services Administration and all that, I made sure that they were giving out contracts and grants and whatever they had to black contractors, to the black colleges and universities, just as they were doing to other people, that they hadn't been doing before we got there.

DC: Right. Yeah, the figure that I have is that the federal government purchases from black businesses rose from thirteen million dollars to a hundred and forty-two million dollars during Nixon's time in office, and during your time. [Laughs]

RB: I know, because we monitored it. And, you know, there's another thing we monitored. The Korean War was going on—not the Korean War—the Vietnam War was going on at the time. We were having big trouble, the race relations problem. There were big race relations problems. When we got to the White House, that was one of the big problems. And

blacks were not being promoted. They were at a certain level and they couldn't go to—when we got to the White House in 1969, when Nixon was inaugurated, we had, I think, two, no more than three, blacks who were an admiral or general or something like that, and most of the departments and all that was in the Army, I believe. I think we had one Navy guy, Gravely, Admiral Gravely, I think he was a rear admiral. But that was it when we got there in 1969.

One of the things that happened, you know, and I started concentrating on this—and Chappie James, who we brought over to be the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Public Affairs and gave him a star because he was a colonel—he was an ace pilot in two wars, one of the top guys in the military that we've ever had, and he was a *colonel*! And was an ace pilot in two wars! And we brought him over, gave him a star, and put him in the Defense Department.

Chappie came to me one day, and he said, "Bob," he said, "We're never going to have a representative number of blacks unless we get something going here in this Defense Department. It's never going to happen." So, I said, "We're going to do something about it, Chappie." So, I talked to Haldeman about it. And he said, "Let me go talk to the President and let me tell him." He said, "I'm on my way to talk to the President now. I'll talk to him and see what he says, and I'll call you back."

And about two or three hours later, I get this call from Haldeman. Haldeman said, [1:55:00] "Bob, I talked to the President, and the President thinks you're exactly right, and he wants to be helpful. He said he figured out that the way that he can be helpful is that every month, they send over the list of flagged officers, because as Commander in Chief, he has to sign off on it. And so, in order to do something about that, Bob," he said, "what I'm going to do, and the President agreed, what I'm going to do is send you the list when it comes over. And you

check it out and see if there are any minorities on the list." He said, "If there are no minorities," he said, "you let me know, and we'll send it right on back."

We sent it back about three or four times in a row, unsigned. Unsigned. Nobody got promoted. Unsigned. And so, all of a sudden, it must have dawned on somebody at the Pentagon that we better, we've got to do something else. So, they started putting some blacks on there, they put a woman on there, and stuff like that. And so, I would check it out. Every time it would come over, I would check it out. And when they started doing that, we sent it back.

By the time I left the White House in 1973, we had a whole lot of black generals, okay? I mean, a lot of them, and then, they congregated all over the place after that. By the time I left there, Chappie James, who had never had a star when we got there. We gave him his first star. By the time I left, he had three stars, and he was the head of our military base in Denver, that strategic base that we have out there.

But there were just so many things like that that happened over and over. I mean, that was vastly important. It changed the way we did business in America, with the military, with business people, with all facets of what we were trying to do. But we had to wade in on it. I even set up a special commission. I did this myself, because I had the President's okay to do whatever. I set up a special commission to go around the world, because we were having race relations problems on military bases all over the world. I set up a special commission to go around the world to check this out and meet with the service people in all these places. You find out all kind of problems.

And then, I would go, from time to time, I would go myself, unannounced, until I got right there near the base. And then, I'd have somebody, one of the military guys on the plane with me to call the base and tell them that I'm going to be landing this plane, he's going to be

landing this plane in the next thirty minutes, and that I wanted to meet with the commanding officer. Because we'd have intelligence that was telling us what was happening on different places.

DC: Yeah, yeah.

RB: I went to Hawaii, spent a lot of time in Hawaii, because we have a lot of military bases there.

DC: Sure do.

RB: And the person who was the head of CINCPAC, over all of our armed forces in the Far East from Hawaii on back, was none other than General John McCain, John McCain's father. I have a picture of him around here somewhere with him and I meeting over there in Hawaii. We became good friends as a result of that, you know.

DC: Okay.

RB: So, you know, it was quite a time.

DC: Amazing work that you did there. So, I have just—

JB: [ ]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're rolling again.

DC: Yeah, so, to just conclude, if you could tell us about Sealtest and A&P.

RB: Well, I got this call one day from one of the guys who was traveling with Dr. King. And Dr. King was in Cleveland, and he said that Dr. King wanted to talk to me and he wanted to meet with me, if I didn't mind coming out there. And I said, "Oh, no, I'll catch the next plane out there." So, I went out to the airport, jumped on an airplane, and went out to Cleveland.

And when I got there, Dr. King came in the room, and he said, "Bob, we've got a problem here." And he says, "And we've got a problem with Sealtest." He said, "You know, we've been trying to meet with them and get them to hire black truck drivers and do some other kinds of things that they need to be doing." [2:00:00] And he said, "They won't even meet with me. They refuse to meet with me or any of my people." And he said, "I'm wondering if you have any suggestions of what we can do."

And I told him, I said, "Yeah," I said, "What I need to do," I said, "I have this relationship with the people at A&P, with the top people at A&P," which at the time was the largest supermarket chain in America. And I said, you know, "I will go to them. I'll call them up and see if I can see them. And then, I'll fly there immediately and see what I can do about it." And he said, "Well, we need to do something, because we want to make some progress, but we're going to have to—we don't want to tear up everything in making progress."

So, I flew to New York and [coughs] got a meeting with the CEO of A&P. And when I went in the room, we expressed greetings and so forth. And I told him, I said, "Let me get right to the point. Here's the point." I said, "Dr. King and his people are in the Cleveland, Ohio, area, and they've been having a lot of problems with Sealtest Dairy." I said, "The Sealtest management won't meet with Dr. King or any of his people."

And I said, "There's going to be big trouble there." I said, "We do not need the A&P stores," because the A&P was a client of mine. So, I said, "We don't need the A&P stores involved in this. We're trying to make, you know, trying to make room in all of the states where A&P is located to have a new relationship." And I said, "We need to be in front of this." And he said, "Well, Bob, what would you recommend?"

I said, "I would recommend that you have somebody to get in touch with A&P, one of our top executives, and let them know—with Sealtest—and let them know that we have a problem with this and we don't want to be involved some kind of way." And he says, "Yeah, you're right, Bob." Then he called in one of his top assistants. He came in the room, and he said, "Look, Bob's been telling me about this problem with Sealtest." And he said, "Yes, sir, we know all about it." Said, "It's a problem out there in the Midwest." And he said, "Well, I want you to call the top people at Sealtest and tell them that if they don't get this situation right with Dr. King, that we are going to take Sealtest products out of *all* of the stores in Ohio." Now, I had recommended initially that maybe we ought to look at taking the products out of all the stores in Cleveland.

DC: [Laughs]

RB: He told him to tell them they were going to take the products out of all the stores in Ohio. Before I could hardly get out of the building, because I had some more meetings there, before I could get out of the building, I called my office, and my office told me that, "Mr. Brown, Dr. King's people are desperately trying to reach you. They're still in Cleveland and they need to talk to you." So, I called them. I called Dr. King.

Dr. King said, "Bob," he said, "I don't know what you told them people." He said, "But the top people at Sealtest have called me several times already. They want to meet this afternoon, they want to meet in the morning, anytime we can meet, they want to meet. They're ready to meet and work with us any way they can." So, they went and met with them.

And that night, Dr. King called a mass rally in Cleveland, at a big church there, at Reverend Hoover's church there, Odie Hoover, [clears throat] Mount Olivet Baptist Church. And so, Dr. King made this speech. And in his speech, he talked about

me. He said, you know, "We've made a major breakthrough here like we haven't made in a while." He said, "But what Sealtest didn't realize is that we have Bob Brown on our side, and he's on our board of directors, and he was the man that made this stuff happen," and so forth. And it's recorded. There's a recording about this, you know. I have one somewhere in the office or somewhere. There's a recording of this speech and what he was talking about. He said, "This is what we're going to do now, you know. This is the way of the future," and so forth. And he talked about my role [2:05:00] in it and everything else, and what I'd done for SCLC.

DC: Amazing, yeah.

RB: So, it was an amazing time.

DC: Um-hmm.

RB: An *amazing* time.

DC: I mean, as I—you know, as I said when we started this a couple of hours ago, that it's not just the, you know, the marches, but it's these kinds of pressures and [laughs] arm-twisting in the back—

RB: Yeah!

DC: This is how change is done.

RB: I mean, if you're not doing that, if you're not making something happen—because it's all about jobs and different kinds of opportunities, contracts with minority business people, all of this. This is what makes the whole thing go round. This is what makes it all a success. You know, because the businesses and the jobs are going on all the time. It's just that you need participation by *all* the people, blacks, browns, grays, whatever they are, you need all the people to participate.

And during the fifties and the sixties, for the most part, and sometimes in the seventies, you had only the whites who were participating in all this. Sealtest and the rest of the milk companies didn't even have any black—they were taking milk throughout all these communities. They had thousands of trucks and truck drivers delivering milk. You remember the mild truck driver?

DC: Um-hmm, sure.

RB: They didn't have *any* blacks!

DC: Not a single driver?

RB: Not a single driver! Delivering black people milk every whichaway, thousands of black people, tens of thousands of them. Didn't have one single driver black! We changed that.

You know, there are just so many different things like that that happened during that time. I mean, a lot of people look at stuff now, and they think it just happened, you know, like out of the clear blue sky, somebody just got religion one day and said, "We're going to help the black people." You know, no, it didn't happen like that. You had to give it some pressure put on them.

And that's what has to happen now. I mean, you know, this thing with Mr. Obama taking the money away from the black colleges, and there are tens of thousands of students who can't go back to school, right now, black kids, because they tightened up the money, the credit crunch on the parents who could not get the loans anymore, because the administration did that, you know. And so, many of the black colleges, you watch, over the next year or two, many of the black colleges are going to be closing down. They can't stay open if they don't have students. The students—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

DC: So, you tell me when.

JB: It's rolling.

DC: Okay. So, I'll just ask you if you have any concluding remarks you'd like to make, I mean, anything that I didn't ask you that I should have asked, or you were expecting me to ask that I didn't, or anything else you'd like to say.

RB: No, I think you've done a great job. I appreciate you coming and I appreciate what you all are doing, and not just for your departments and history departments and all that, but for what the museum is doing, and what it will represent to ages yet unborn, to those kids, and to many of the young people today. They have absolutely no idea of what went on, and they'll get this from this museum and what you all are doing now. And it'll be a guidepost for many people, white, black, whoever, to see what has happened and to give them some sense of what they ought to be doing in the years ahead. So, I appreciate what you've done and what you continue to do.

DC: Well, thank you so much. And, yeah, it's been a battle just to get, you know, just to get the museum, as you know.

RB: Oh, yeah. But I never thought that we would have a Black History Museum right there in the heart of Washington, in probably the most prime spot that you can put a museum in the capitol of the world. I think it's fantastic. Every time I go by there, the tears just well up in my eyes now, you know, and I'm back and forth in Washington all the time. But I think it's a wonderful, magnificent thing.

And I congratulate you, all of you, for what you've done, and especially Lonnie and the board and everybody involved. I think you've done a great job. And I'm looking forward to seeing the finished product and to getting a lot of young people, blacks and whites and others, there to see it, and particularly some young people from Africa. [2:10:00] I think they need to see

this. That would help them a great deal. And I'm in touch with a lot of them. We're still sending a lot of books into schools there. And many of them who can come over here to visit. So, I'm going to be taking—when you finish, I'm going to be taking a lot of them through that museum.

DC: Fantastic. What a great way to end! Well, thank you so much.

RB: Thank you.

DC: Thank you. It's been just terrific.

[Recording ends at 2:10:28]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcript by Sally C. Council